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Britain and genocide: historical and contemporary parameters of national responsibility

MARTIN SHAW*

Abstract. This article (originally given as the Annual War Studies Lecture at King's College, London, on 25 January 2010) challenges the assumption that Britain's relationship to genocide is constituted by its 'vigilance' towards the genocide of others. Through a critical overview of the question of genocide in the historical and contemporary politics of the British state and society, the article suggests their wide-ranging, complex relationships to genocide. Utilising a conception of genocide as multi-method social destruction and applying the interpretative frames of the genocide literature, it argues that the British state and elements of identifiably British populations have been involved directly and indirectly in genocide in a number of different international contexts. These are addressed through five themes: the role of genocide in the origins of the British state; the problem of genocide in the Empire and British settler colonialism; Britain's relationships to twentieth-century European genocide; its role in the genocidal violence of decolonisation; and finally, Britain's role in the genocidal crises of the post-Cold War world. The article examines the questions of national responsibility that this survey raises: while rejecting simple ideas of national responsibility as collective guilt, it nevertheless argues that varying kinds of responsibility for genocide attach to British institutions, leaders and population groups at different points in the history surveyed.

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There have now been ten Holocaust Memorial Days in Britain. In June 1999 the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was asked in Parliament to institute such a day and replied: 'I am determined to ensure that the horrendous crimes against humanity committed during the Holocaust are never forgotten. The ethnic cleansing and killing that has taken place in Europe in recent weeks are a stark

* This article is a revised version of the Annual War Studies Lecture given at King's College, London, on 25 January 2010, on the eve of the annual Holocaust Memorial Day.

example of the need for vigilance.’¹ Blair was referring of course to the Kosovo War, during which he had been among the NATO leaders most committed to securing the return of the expelled Albanians. When Blair made his remarks, Serbian President Slobodan Milošević had recently capitulated and British troops were about to enter Kosovo. And although Holocaust Memorial Day is an international event – its origins lie in the *Gedenktag für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus* (Anniversary for the Victims of National Socialism) held in Germany since 1996 – Blair’s comments indicated its particular British significance.² In Britain, Holocaust Memorial Day remembers genocide that *other* nations have committed, whether the Nazi extermination of the Jews or the Serbian expulsion of the Kosovo Albanians, and against which *our* country stands as a ‘vigilant’, and if necessary armed, protector of the innocent. Not for the British the national self-criticism that produced the German commemoration, or which even in Australia and the US has produced official recognition of crimes perpetrated against indigenous people in the course of colonisation. Not for Britain even the academic debate about our country’s relationship to the history of genocide, which has preoccupied intellectuals and scholars in these countries.³ The institution of the Memorial Day did, it is true, provoke some discussion among Holocaust scholars, one of whom opposed its institution on grounds that included the danger that ‘the day will act as a convenient opportunity for the government to present itself as morally upright, thereby occluding its involvement in contemporary ethnic, religious or other forms of discrimination’.⁴ Another warned of the danger of reinforcing the British people’s ‘rather self-satisfied perception of the Second World War as unambiguously a “good” war from which this country emerged triumphant and morally vindicated’. Instead, David Cesarani argued, we should recognise that ‘[t]he *ambiguity* of Britain’s response to Nazi tyranny and racism is lodged in our heritage’.⁵

My primary aims in this article are therefore to remedy these deficiencies in a more systematic way, concerning genocide in general as well as the Holocaust in particular: to question the assumption of British impunity; to argue for a debate about Britain’s role in the history and current politics of genocide; and to make a first attempt to define its parameters. However some disclaimers are necessary. In calling for this debate, I do not suggest that Britain bears an equivalent historic responsibility to that of Germany or any other country (although I shall argue that

¹ Home Office, *Government Proposal for a Holocaust Memorial Day* (October 1999), available at: {<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/cons-1999-holocaust.pdf>} accessed on 11 December 2009.

² Although Levene, ‘Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day’, suggests that this day results from a Swedish initiative, Andrew Pearce, ‘The Development of Holocaust Consciousness in Contemporary Britain 1979–2001’, *Holocaust Studies*, 14:2 (2008), emphasises Britain’s role in this instituting this event internationally.

³ The German literature is too extensive to cite, but for Australia, see A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004), and for the US, Samantha Power, *A ‘Problem From Hell’: America and the Age of Genocide* (London: Flamingo, 2003).

⁴ Dan Stone, ‘Day of Remembering or Day of Forgetting? Or, Why Britain Does Not Need a Holocaust Memorial Day’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 34 (2000), pp. 53–9. Mark Levene, ‘Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day’, while approving the institution of the Day, went further in accusing the government of ‘brazen hypocrisy’.

⁵ David Cesarani, *Britain, the Holocaust and its Legacy: the theme for Holocaust Memorial Day* (2002), {<http://www.hmd.org.uk/files/1149797162–22.pdf>} accessed on 30 December 2009, p. 2, emphasis added.

British agencies and people have sometimes been perpetrators, as well as implicated in the genocides of others, the British state has not practised large-scale, centrally coordinated genocide). Nor do I suggest that Britain is alone in lacking the kinds of national debate that Germany and Australia have had; on the contrary, absence of debate is the international norm, even in countries like Japan and Russia where huge questions should arise about relatively recent history. Nor do I call for this debate so that we will call on our government to apologise to the victims of past atrocities that British institutions have perpetrated, condoned or failed to prevent.

Indeed although I use the term 'national responsibility' in my title, this idea needs radically unpacking from the outset. Entire nations are *not* responsible for the actions of their distant ancestors or even, in any simple sense, of their recent governments. The idea of collective national responsibility or guilt is one that informs *genocidal* thinking – for example, Adolf Hitler's belief that the Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in the First World War lay behind his programme for their destruction. Scholars have no business perpetuating this idea. Therefore by national responsibility I mean the direct and indirect responsibility of *particular* national leaders, institutions or groups in society, for particular policies, actions and outcomes. I do so in order to propose and explore the implications of a *differentiated* concept of responsibility. As to apologies, it would be reasonable (in principle) to ask a Labour government, for example, to apologise to Serbs or Albanians for bombings in the Kosovo War, since the lines of responsibility connecting current leaders to recent actions are clear, and current Serb and Kosovo Albanian populations contain people who suffered from NATO bombing in 1999. But it makes less sense to ask that government to apologise for the policies of the British Empire in India or Africa a hundred or more years ago, when the Labour Party barely existed, to populations who are at most distant descendants of the Empire's victims.

My more general aim, therefore, is to promote a less simply political and more historically reflective discussion of the prevalence of genocide, in both modern history and contemporary politics. In this sense, my British focus is a way of suggesting that, if *Britain* is implicated in genocide in multiple and complex ways, then genocide must be a larger problem than is often assumed; I want to stimulate reflection on this problem. I had a parallel motive for addressing this in the forum of the Annual War Studies Lecture. Genocide has been perpetrated so frequently in the context of war – from the Second World War to Kosovo and beyond – that I want to provoke thought about both the circumstances in which war leads to genocide and the difficult questions of whether, or under which conditions, military power may also play a part in preventing or halting genocide. However even if genocide is more prevalent than commonly believed, and often occurs in the context of war, it remains crucial to *distinguish* genocide clearly from war and from non-genocidal oppression, if only to fully explore their complex *linkages*. It is also important, in emphasising the *regularity* with which genocide occurs in modern world history, to stress that it is not a *universal* feature of the modern international system, but has occurred only in particular types of historical context, which I shall examine in turn.⁶

⁶ In this sense I do not agree with Mark Levene's proposal (in *Genocide and the Nation-State* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005) that genocide should be seen as a problem of the modern world system in its most

One more preliminary: I cannot avoid the vexed question of the meaning of genocide. This form of political violence is often defined very narrowly, as the deliberate mass killing of all members of a nation, ethnicity or similar group.⁷ However the inventor of the word, Raphaël Lemkin, meant by it something different: a general class of policies and actions directed towards the 'destruction' of a 'group'. He saw physical destruction as only one among many different methods, among which he listed economic, political and cultural as well as biological means.⁸ The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the UN in 1948, also adopted a relatively broad definition (if narrower than Lemkin's), specifying killing as only one of five means.⁹ My view is that genocide is a *generally* violent type of action or policy – that must be what is meant by the 'destruction' of a group – but that the relationships between killing, rape, expulsion and the many forms of coercion involved are matters of empirical investigation rather than definition. Moreover, although most targets of genocide are what we call ethnic or national groups, these categories are not essential to the definition of genocide, since the same type of violence may be used to destroy populations defined by perpetrators in a variety of ways – and it is *their* definitions which determine who is attacked.¹⁰ What the targets of genocide have in common is that they are largely unarmed *civilian* populations, so genocide occurs when 'armed power organisations treat civilian social groups as enemies and aim to destroy their real or putative social power, by means of killing, violence and coercion against individuals whom they regard as members of the groups'. It is also important to note that genocide is not simply one-sided action, but 'a form of violent social conflict or war, between armed power organisations that aim to destroy civilian social groups and those groups or other actors who resist this destruction'.¹¹

In my terms, therefore, Milošević's murderous expulsion of the majority of Kosovo Albanians in March 1999 constituted genocide. Of course some scholars follow Blair in describing this episode by the euphemistic term, 'ethnic cleansing', which emerged from Serbian nationalist discourse during the Bosnian war (even if it was anticipated by discourses of racial 'purification' and 'cleansing' in many earlier episodes), was then adopted by international institutions and media, and is now widely used to describe the deportation, forcible removal or induced flight of populations. The numerous historians and historical sociologists (such as Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, Norman Naimark, Phillip Ther, and Michael Mann) who have

general sense: rather I see it as a product of specific historical conjunctures in the development of this system, an argument I develop in my forthcoming paper, 'Genocide in International Relations: Endemic and Systemic Manifestations in Twentieth-Century Europe'.

⁷ For example, genocide is defined by Helen Fein as 'sustained purposeful action to physically destroy a collectivity', 'Genocide: A Sociological Perspective', *Current Sociology*, 38 (1990), p. 23; by Frank Chalk and Hans Jonassohn as 'a form of one-sided mass killing', *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 24; and by Israel Charny as 'the mass killing of a substantial number of human beings', 'Toward a Generic Definition of Genocide', in G.A. Andreopoulos (ed.), *Genocide: Conceptual and Historical Dimensions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 75. For a critique, see Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 28–33.

⁸ Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (New York: Carnegie Foundation for International Peace, 1944), pp. xi–xii.

⁹ Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948).

¹⁰ Chalk and Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology*, p. 24.

¹¹ Shaw, *What is Genocide?*, p. 154.

adopted this term have emphasised the difference between expelling and exterminating a group.¹² However in terms of Lemkin's original concept, such policies can be seen as genocide because they are always designed to destroy a particular group's pattern of social life in a given territory and they always involve killing, violence and extreme coercion. Expulsion and murder are two different methods of destroying groups; but the end of group destruction, which is central from a sociological point of view, is the same. Moreover while in principle expulsion and murder are different methods, the idea of peaceful or humane transfers is mythical. Uprooting whole populations from their homes, land and communities, in which their ancestors have often lived for centuries, is always experienced as the fundamental, violent destruction of a way of life. Thus while there are certainly large differences between the least and most murderous destructive policies, those who wish to confine 'genocide' to the few cases of attempted total mass murder like the Final Solution ignore the fact that the latter are generally preceded and/or accompanied by policies of deportation and expulsion. (The Nazis first removed Jews from their homes and concentrated them in ghettos, before they developed extermination policies; yet their earlier policies already showed the same destructive animus towards Jewish society in Europe). So while Serbian policies in Kosovo, like Nazi policies in 1939–1940, were vastly less murderous than the Final Solution, they were still genocidal. We would not argue that there was no war in Kosovo because the conflict was not as murderous as the war on the Eastern Front in 1941–1945; likewise we should not dismiss genocide in Kosovo through maximal historical comparisons.

Therefore genocide, like war, is a general type of action and conflict, which comes in many shapes, sizes and degrees of murderousness. This idea, which was fundamental to Lemkin's original approach, was already being marginalised when the UN drafted its Genocide Convention in 1948, excluding any specific reference to expulsion (a policy the Allies themselves carried out and endorsed), although this was the most common method through which states (and others) deliberately destroyed national, ethnic and other groups. As William Schabas notes: 'There is no doubt that the drafters of the Convention quite deliberately resisted attempts to encompass the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing within the punishable acts. According to the comments accompanying the Secretariat draft, the proposed definition excluded 'certain acts which may result in the total or partial destruction of a group of human beings [...] namely [...] mass displacements of population'.¹³ The loss of this meaning has been further emphasised in recent years, particularly because of the influence of the Holocaust paradigm on the concept of genocide in general. Thus international law has increasingly treated genocide as a specific

¹² Andrew Bell-Fialkoff, *Ethnic Cleansing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Phillip Ther, 'A Century of Forced Migration: The Origins and Consequences of Ethnic Cleansing', in Ther and Anna Siljak (eds), *Redrawing nations: ethnic cleansing in East-Central Europe, 1944–1948* (Boulder: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), p. 51; Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). William A. Schabas points out that the term is a 'euphemism for genocide': *Genocide in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 194. For a critique of the concept, Shaw, *What is Genocide?*, pp. 48–62.

¹³ William Schabas, *Genocide in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 196; quotation abbreviated by Schabas.

crime, alongside crimes against humanity and war crimes, as for example when the International Court of Justice ruled that genocide had been committed in the mass murder at Srebrenica but *not* in the general pattern of Serbian policies to destroy the Muslim community in Bosnia.¹⁴ Yet from the point of view of social, international and historical research, such (in part politically motivated) developments are retrograde, artificially severing the links between different destructive policies. As genocide studies increasingly transcend Holocaust-centric approaches, contextualising Nazi anti-Jewish policies in broader patterns not only of European but of colonial and post-colonial anti-population violence, there is not surprisingly renewed interest in a broader concept of genocide.¹⁵ Such an approach enables us to examine anti-group and anti-population violence as a whole, examining links between different violent and coercive methods in historical contexts, rather than validating political claims which prioritise the experiences of particular victim-groups.¹⁶

Genocide in the formation of modern Britain

This expanding genocide literature has forged a number of interpretative frames, but these have never been systematically applied to the British case. In this article I remedy this deficiency by considering in turn five themes: the role of genocide in the origins of the British state; the problem of genocide in the Empire and British settler colonialism; Britain's relationships to twentieth-century European genocide; its role in the genocidal violence of decolonisation; and finally, Britain's role in the genocidal crises of the post-Cold War world. This is a broad agenda and so I shall be sparse with empirical detail; I have drawn on numerous specialist literatures and, although I have tried to make the necessary qualifications, inevitably some of my generalisations may seem a little sweeping.

The role of genocide in the origins of the British state may be the least expected theme. Certainly, problems of genocidal dispossession have been widely examined in the origins of relatively new states, such as Australia, the US and Israel,¹⁷ and in east-central Europe.¹⁸ However the British tend to regard their state as formed

¹⁴ See International Court of Justice, 'Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide' (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro), 'Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide' (Bosnia and Herzegovina v. Serbia and Montenegro), {<https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/91/13685.pdf>}; and Martin Shaw, 'The International Court of Justice: Serbia, Bosnia, and genocide', {http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/icj_bosnia_serbia_4392.jsp} both accessed on 2 May 2010.

¹⁵ See Ann Curthoys and John Docker, 'Defining Genocide', in Dan Stone (eds), *The Historiography of Genocide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 9–42.

¹⁶ A. Dirk Moses, 'Introduction: The Field of Genocide Studies', in *Genocide: Critical Historical Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2010), Volume 1.

¹⁷ A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society*; A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Colonialism and Genocide* (London: Routledge, 2007); Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination* (London: Yale University Press, 2007); Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State: Volume 2, The Rise of the West*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005); Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Zed, 2007).

¹⁸ Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: imperialism, nationalism, and the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard Bessel and Claudia B. Haake

by gradual processes of accretion, as an English state emerged out of the various Anglo-Saxon and Danish kingdoms, was conquered by the Normans, separated from their large possessions in modern France, conquered Wales, united with Scotland and incorporated Ireland to form the United Kingdom – from which the Irish Republic separated in the twentieth century. Clearly there was, in this long history, no single foundational genocide as has been argued in other cases. However genocide is not only a matter of large-scale, coordinated campaigns like the Holocaust, but also of more episodic, localised ‘genocidal massacres’¹⁹ and expulsions, in the context of military campaigns and religious and political persecution.

Of these there have been plenty in the history of the English and British states. I give as examples two medieval episodes from my home county, Yorkshire. First, Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley argue, the Norman dynasty owed its hegemony to an extensive destruction of the indigenous population: ‘William the Conqueror [...] commanded that Yorkshire be cleared of its population in order to break the ability of the Anglo-Saxon lords of that region to continue their resistance of the Norman Conquest. No one is sure how many died, but the systematic destruction of villages and crops, the widespread murder and flights into the surrounding mountains, where enslavement by Scottish tribes or starvation awaited the refugees, greatly reduced the population.’²⁰ I don’t entirely recognise the geography to which these American historians refer (the Yorkshire I know is hardly surrounded by mountains), but the point that a brutal counter-insurgency made the Anglo-Saxons victims of what would now be called ‘ethnic cleansing’ or genocide, is well taken. However a century or so later, some of the English (as they were coming to regard themselves) were implicated in a different violent episode in roughly the same locale, against the Jewish population. Here I strike a personal note, as the site of the violence was Clifford’s Tower, the keep of the Norman castle in York, in whose shadow my mother was born and down whose steep, grassy hillside my own children later liked to roll. Yet in 1190, the wooden predecessor of the surviving stone edifice had been burnt down together with about 150 Jews who had taken refuge in it from a mob; many of them took their own lives rather than be killed, while others were massacred. The Tower’s tourist website rightly links this event, which we might now call a genocidal massacre, with the accession of Richard I, the Crusader king.²¹ He is an iconic figure in English history, the hero of another of my boyhood experiences, the TV series of *Robin Hood* with a catchy theme tune and Richard Greene in the title role. It was Richard who promoted anti-Jewish sentiment – although the website reassures us that his Chancellor ‘imposed a heavy fine on York’s citizens’ as punishment for the massacre. Yet before we build up an anti-heroic version of *English* history, let us recall that while Richard was King of

(eds), *Removing peoples: forced removal in the modern world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); P. Ahonen et al., *People on the move: forced population movements in Europe in the Second World War and its aftermath* (Oxford: Berg, 2008).

¹⁹ Leo Kuper, *Genocide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 32.

²⁰ Daniel Chirot and Clark McCauley, *Why Not Kill Them All? The Logic and Prevention of Mass Political Murder*, p. 14.

²¹ {<http://www.cliffordstower.com/index.htm>} accessed 10 November 2009.

England, he hardly spoke English and spent most of his reign – when he was not fighting the Crusades, concerning which perhaps other questions of genocidal violence arise – in his Duchy of Aquitaine in modern France.

More directly pertinent to the role of genocide in the formation of the British state is the long-controversial Cromwellian conquest of Ireland. There is no doubt that this was a brutal military campaign; but Cromwell's Irish policy was also, genocide historian Mark Levene contends, 'a conscious attempt to reduce a distinct ethnic population, not simply on the grounds of their religious disposition, but also for demonstrating their potential to challenge the mono-directional and monopolistic thrust of an Anglo-Protestant dominated British Isles. The genocidal process which emerged after 1651 was [not] simply a short-term military strategy [...] It was a long-term political policy.' The 1652 Act for the Settlement of Ireland is, he argues, 'the nearest thing *on paper*, in the English and more broadly British domestic record, to a programme of state-sanctioned and systematic ethnic cleansing of another people [...] The expropriated were to be required to move, on pain of death, to a designated area the most westerly corner of Ireland and so make way for a massive new wave of Anglo-Scottish settlers who would supersede them.'²² This was not extermination in the sense of the Final Solution, Levene says, but it *was* – like 'the Nazis' 1939–40 projected removal of Polish Jewry' – the eviction of 'a troublesome population whose place within the national or colonial frame had been definitively and permanently revoked'.²³ However, a decade earlier, in 1641–1642, Irish insurgents in Ulster had killed between 4,000 and 12,000 Protestants who had settled on land whose former Catholic owners had been evicted. If these massacres 'were magnified for propagandist purposes to justify Cromwell's subsequent genocide',²⁴ nevertheless they demonstrate something which modern genocide studies increasingly emphasises: genocidal violence often begins in the resistance of 'subaltern' peoples, only to be followed by the even greater violence of the imperial power.²⁵

As Michael Hechter argued, this Irish history anticipates the wider history of British empire and colonisation.²⁶ Within the British Isles, the closest comparison is the destruction of the Gaelic-speaking clan society in the Scottish Highlands between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. Over this century, a combination of anti-Jacobite repression, including suppression of traditional culture (seen as necessary for the consolidation of the Anglo-Scottish imperial British state), and landlord dispossession reduced a once-thriving society to a shadow of its former self. If Levene is right to say that there was no singular

²² Levene, *Genocide, Volume 2*, p. 56, emphasis in the original.

²³ Levene, *Genocide, Volume 2*, p. 57.

²⁴ Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's Ordeal and the Search for Peace* (New York: Roberts Rinehart, 1997), p. 6. Of course 'genocide' has been used and abused on both sides of the Irish divide: Robbie McVeigh, "'The balance of cruelty': Ireland, Britain and the logic of genocide", *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10 (2008), pp. 541–63.

²⁵ A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008); Adam Jones and Nicholas A. Robbins (eds), *Genocides by the Oppressed: Subaltern Genocide in Theory and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

²⁶ Of course the consolidation of the British state can also be seen through the perspective of colonisation, as argued by Michael Hecter, *Internal Colonialism: the Celtic fringe in British national development, 1536–1966* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1975).

genocidal policy of the kind that was seen in Ireland,²⁷ this was a case, similar to more distant colonial experiences on which I comment below, in which the combination of different kinds of political and economic policies over time resulted in the destruction of traditional society. Indeed even in England in the same period, brutal law-enforcement was directed against the rural and urban poor,²⁸ with sharp (if not genocidal) repression of the emergent trade unions and the Chartist movement. Only from the second half of that century did Britain increasingly deserve a reputation for the peaceful gradualism of its political change, showing less political violence than many other European countries.

Genocide in British imperialism and colonialism

Yet despite the subduing of the state's internal foes, international violence continued. As Leon Trotsky argued, 'the whole history of Great Britain is first of all the history of violent changes which the British governing classes have made in the life of *other* nations'.²⁹ An even more drastic verdict was recently proposed by the Native American scholar-activist, Ward Churchill. For him the English are 'global leaders in genocidal activities, both in terms of overall efficiency – as they consummated the total extinction of the Tasmanians in 1876 – and a flair for innovation embodied in their deliberate use of alcohol to effect the total extinction of the many of North America's indigenous peoples'.³⁰ I am unsure if this comparative judgement would survive a careful study of other European countries' colonial records, but it challenges the relatively benign view of British colonialism in some of the literature,³¹ which has led to a particular 'smugness' about British imperialism.³² Indeed if there is a problem with Trotsky's dictum, it is that it was not only the 'governing' classes and those acting directly on their orders, but also more 'ordinary' British people acting on their own accounts who were involved in violence.³³ If the growing literature on empire and genocide has a dominant theme, it is that *settler* colonialism is the main problem. Michael Mann, who uses the term 'murderous cleansing' for what I call genocide, concludes from a broad historical survey: 'The more settlers controlled colonial institutions, the more murderous the cleansing [. . .] It is the most direct relationship I have found between democratic regimes and mass murder.'³⁴ Dirk Moses had earlier made a similar argument about Australia, where about six hundred Indigenous cultural-linguistic groups,

²⁷ Levene, *Genocide*, Volume 2, pp. 58–9. See also, Eric Richards, *The Highland Clearances: People, Landlords and Rural Turmoil* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2000).

²⁸ See, for example, E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the origin of the Black Act* (London: Allen Lane, 1975).

²⁹ Leon Trotsky, *Where is Britain Going?* (London: Pathfinder, 1970), p. 17.

³⁰ Ward Churchill, quoted by A. Dirk Moses, 'Genocide and Settler Society in Australian History', in Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society*, p. 4.

³¹ A. Dirk Moses cites Hannah Arendt's 'naïve paen to British expansion': 'Genocide and Settler Society', pp. 4–5; for a more recent version, see Niall Ferguson, *Empire: how Britain made the modern world* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

³² Maria Misra, 'Heart of Smugness', *Guardian* (23 July 2002).

³³ The role of 'ordinary' people in genocide is another major theme of the literature: see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: reserve police battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

³⁴ Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy*, p. 4.

many of whom regarded themselves as separate peoples, were either wiped out or drastically reduced in numbers and displaced from their traditional lands. Although much Aboriginal decline was an indirect result of British settlement, he suggests that 'each willed act of extermination by settlers and/or the state of an Aboriginal group could be regarded as genocide. In that case, many genocides took place in Australia, rather than [its] being the site of a single genocidal event.'³⁵ Moses' conclusion is that settler colonialism was structurally prone to genocide, and the process involved serial 'genocidal moments'.³⁶ He agrees that settlers and local militia were the main perpetrators: 'rarely can exterminatory intent be discerned in British authorities', yet 'there was a greater degree of consciousness about the fatal impact of their presence' than defenders of the official role have contended.³⁷ British authorities in London and Australia willed colonial settlement knowing that it foretold the often-brutal removal of the indigenous inhabitants, even if they sometimes condemned the specific means that settlers adopted. In the light of this conclusion, it is surprising that while Australia has had a vigorous national debate on genocide, British commentators have mostly regarded this as a purely local affair, without implications for the 'home country' from which most settlers came – or, indeed, were sent as a matter of state policy.³⁸

The converse of the case that settler colonialism is particularly prone to genocide is that empire *without* large-scale settlement is less so. In the British Empire, whereas settler colonies in North America and Australasia generally overwhelmed indigenous peoples, colonies in Africa often combined seizure of agricultural lands with rule over large indigenous populations, and the jewel in the imperial crown, the Indian Raj, saw a situation in which a small imperial caste ruled over hundreds of millions of Indians (Adolf Hitler notoriously saw this as a model for his empire in eastern Europe).³⁹ Thus imperial rule in India was not generally genocidal; but nevertheless, in the light of current debates, major questions arise about two types of nineteenth century episode. First, genocide studies have increasingly highlighted the importance of war as the occasion of genocide.⁴⁰ In the context of empire, this means that moments of conquest and rebellion are more dangerous than periods of successful or stable imperial rule. In Indian history, the Mutiny of 1857 demands attention, first because of the murderous 'subaltern' animus of the rebel soldiers towards the European population, including women and children (the subject of much Victorian propaganda concerning the events), but also because of the brutality of the British military

³⁵ Moses, 'Genocide and Settler Society', p. 19.

³⁶ A. Dirk Moses, 'An antipodean genocide? The origins of the genocidal moment in the colonization of Australia', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 2 (2000), pp. 89–106.

³⁷ Moses, 'Genocide and Settler Society', p. 5.

³⁸ A scholarly account which recognises this issue is Dan Stone, 'Britannia Rules the Waives', in his *History, Memory and Mass Atrocity: Essays on the Holocaust and Genocide* (Edinburgh: Mitchell, Valentine and Co., 2006). As to political discourse, in this context it is interesting to note the coordinated apologies of the Australian and British governments for the harm caused to *British* children separated from their families and sent to Australia in the mid-twentieth century. See, Peter Walker, 'Brown to apologise to care home children sent to Australia and Canada', *The Guardian* (16 November 2009). It is also important to recognise the limitations of the official Australian acknowledgement of genocide: Tony Barta, 'Sorry, and not sorry, in Australia: how the apology to the stolen generations buried a history of genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10 (2008), pp. 201–14.

³⁹ Mark Mazower, *Hitler's Empire: Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe* (London: Allen Lane, 2009), p. 229.

⁴⁰ Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

repression which went far beyond the defeat of the rebels to extensive massacres of Indian civilians.⁴¹ Second, genocide studies have delved into the murky histories of large-scale famine. In several important cases, such as the Stalinist 'terror-famine' in the Ukraine in the early 1930s and the even larger famine resulting from Mao Zedong's 'Great Leap Forward' in 1958–1961, it has been argued that state policy disastrously exacerbated the human consequences of climatic failures, and that leaders who ignored peasant suffering effectively willed mass death.⁴² But similar claims have been made about famines in British India in the final quarter of the nineteenth century.⁴³ In these 'late Victorian holocausts', as Mike Davis calls them, British policies exacerbated natural problems: 'those with the power to relieve famine convinced themselves that overly heroic exertions against implacable natural laws, whether of market prices or population growth, were worse than no effort at all'.⁴⁴ The result of British inaction was that millions of Indians died.⁴⁵

Insurgencies and counter-insurgencies during decolonisation in the third quarter of the twentieth century raised similar questions to the Mutiny. During the insurrection of the Land and Freedom Army (known to the British as Mau Mau) in Kenya from 1952–1960, for example, the British detained 160,000 'suspected terrorists' in camps, while concentrating almost the entire Kikuyu population (1.5 million) in villages ringed with barbed wire. Counter-insurgency tactics included summary executions; electric shock; mass deportations; slave labour; the burning down of villages and similar collective punishments; starvation; and rape. Tens of thousands died from the combined effects of exhaustion, disease, starvation and systemic physical brutality. In contrast, the 'savage' insurgents had killed about eighteen hundred Kenyan loyalists as well as thirty-two settlers out of a total of ninety-five 'Europeans'.⁴⁶ Here, as often before and since and at many hands, degenerate counter-insurgency war, much more than insurgency itself, approached the borderline between extreme repression and the partial destruction of society. Yet this aroused little opposition in 1950s Britain: as Stephen Howe has commented, there was nothing like 'the engagement of Sartre, Camus and others with France's crimes in Algeria. Liberal Britain's muted reaction to the Kenyan crisis remains puzzling, and shaming'.⁴⁷ And in today's Britain, despite the recent scholarly attention, it is almost forgotten.

There is more to say about this issue in the context of the Empire, but let me draw some interim conclusions. Clearly the literature does not support facile

⁴¹ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 143 *et seq.*

⁴² Robert Conquest, *The harvest of sorrow: Soviet collectivization and the terror famine* (London: Hutchinson, 1986); Jasper Becker, *Hungry ghosts: China's secret famine* (London: John Murray, 1997).

⁴³ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño famines and the making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 25–60.

⁴⁴ Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ Lest we think that these issues concern only the distant past, these attitudes were echoed in the Bengal famine of 1943, in which, according to Yasmin Khan, 'the Bengali public had been left starving to death, and perhaps as many as three million people died because of shoddy government food allocation and skewed political priorities.' *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 17.

⁴⁶ Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), p. 366; see also, David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's dirty war in Kenya and the end of empire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005).

⁴⁷ Stephen Howe, 'Forgotten Shame of Empire' (review), *The Independent* (21 January 2005).

equations of British imperialism, or even settler colonialism, everywhere and always with genocide. Nor does it suggest that central authorities in the British state developed *overall* genocidal policies: rather, genocidal moments seem to be mainly the direct responsibility of settlers, local administrations and military commanders. But it does suggest that genocide was a repeated problem of British – as of most other – imperial and colonial expansions, in which the imperial centre was often, if usually indirectly, implicated.

Britain's role in twentieth-century European genocide

I move now to twentieth-century Europe, the locus not only of the Holocaust and the wider Nazi genocide⁴⁸ but of complex, multi-centred genocidal dynamics. This is the terrain on which nationalist and Communist regimes were the perpetrators of some of the most monstrous historical crimes. Indeed genocide became endemic in important parts of the European international system between roughly 1875 and 1949, from the Balkans before the First World War to eastern and central Europe as a whole in the Second.⁴⁹ Britain did not commit genocide, but as a repeatedly victorious great power could not avoid being implicated in various ways in wider European developments.

As Donald Bloxham puts it, there was a 'great game of genocide' in south-eastern Europe during the final crisis of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman-Turkish genocide of the Armenians in 1915 was the nadir of a half-century of anti-population violence between 1875 and 1923, in which both the Empire and the emergent nation-states carried out genocidal expulsions from their territories. Throughout this 'great game', the British espoused 'humanitarian' principles, while tacitly encouraging Armenian and other Christian nationalists against the Ottomans, to the point of condoning their expulsions of Muslims and helping provoke Ottoman atrocities. In British responses to the Armenian genocide, as later with the Holocaust, 'the warning of punishment for the chief perpetrators substituted for any overall policy of assistance to the victims'.⁵⁰ Following the First World War, the British government of David Lloyd George was central, with the USA and France, to the attempt to manage nationalist 'population politics' which dominated the Paris settlement.⁵¹ However this process stimulated the national conflicts it was meant to control: states and nationalist movements manoeuvred militarily to secure conditions on the ground prior to international agreement. Notoriously, Britain supported the Greek army when it

⁴⁸ Lemkin, *Axis Rule*, referred to the Nazi genocide in general.

⁴⁹ Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide*; 'The Great Unweaving: The Removal of Peoples in Europe, 1875–1949', in Bessell and Haake, *Removing Peoples*, pp. 167–208; and *The Final Solution – A Genocide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Although Bloxham's idea of a 'great game of genocide' suggests that genocide, in the sense used here, was a general phenomenon, he is definitionally more cautious than this suggests and refers only to the Armenian case conclusively as a genocide. See also, Cathie Carmichael, *Genocide before the Holocaust* (London: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ Bloxham, *The Great Game*, p. 138.

⁵¹ On this history in general see Eric D. Weitz, 'From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions', *American Historical Review*, 113 (2008), pp. 1313–43.

invaded Anatolia in 1919, provoking 'inter-communal atrocities [...] in which the Greeks were the greater perpetrators',⁵² only to be beaten back by the Turkish army which in its turn brutally attacked the historic Greek populations, notoriously at Smyrna (Izmir) in 1922. Bloxham notes the fate of orthodox archbishop Chrystosomos – who in 1919 blessed the disembarking Greek troops – who was now torn to pieces by a Turkish mob. 'Such', he writes, 'was the outcome of Greco-British imperialism in Anatolia'.⁵³ The conclusion to this episode was the Lausanne treaty of 1923 through which the new Turkey completed by great power legitimisation – and with the Greek-Turkish 'population exchange' – the process of ethnic homogenisation begun in the 1915 genocide.

Elsewhere, too, 'majority' national states and movements used the Paris framework to press home their advantages over minorities, even to the point of violent expulsion; and the provisions were as successful in provoking powerful nationalists as in protecting minorities. Indeed Hitler invoked these provisions to justify his invasion of the Czech Sudetenland in 1938. It would be facile to simply blame British politicians for these outcomes; but it would be equally facile to see Britain as apart from the increasingly genocidal logic of much Continental politics. This conclusion is borne out by an examination of British policies during the Second World War. Winston Churchill's well-known reluctance to prioritise action to stop the Holocaust is one side of this story.⁵⁴ As Cesarani summarises: 'Documents show that the British Government knew about the slaughter the Jews from the moment it began, but did not issue any official condemnation of the genocide until very late. There was no attempt to prevent the genocide, even when counter measures were feasible. Nor were restrictions on refugee immigration to Britain or Palestine eased. British policy was to defeat the Nazis without paying too much attention to distractions such as the persecution and mass murder of the Jews, or wasting resources on humanitarian initiatives.'⁵⁵ The other side, however, is Britain's reaction when its allies advocated their own genocidal moves to counter those of the Germans. When in 1942 the exiled Czechoslovak President, Edvard Beneš, suggested expelling the remaining ethnic German populations from their countries after the war, the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Anthony Eden, conveyed his government's approval.⁵⁶ When Stalin proposed pushing Poles westwards into former German territories and expelling Germans from the USSR as well as Czechoslovakia and Poland, the British and Americans argued over the extent, but not the principles, of territorial revision and expulsion.⁵⁷ When, in the concluding stages of the war and afterwards, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Yugoslavia implemented their German expulsions, the Western Allies did little even to ensure that they were 'orderly and humane', as their Potsdam agreement with Stalin had required.⁵⁸ Over ten million were forced out, at the cost of half a million lives, with the British, Americans and French

⁵² Bloxham, *The Great Game*, p. 163.

⁵³ Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide*, p. 165.

⁵⁴ Michael J. Cohen, *Churchill and the Jews*, 2nd edition (Abingdon: Cass, 2003), pp. 261–305.

⁵⁵ Cesarani, *Britain, the Holocaust and its Legacy*, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Detlef Brandes, 'National and International Planning of the "Transfer" of Germans from Czechoslovakia and Poland', in Bessel and Haake, *Removing Peoples*, pp. 286–7.

⁵⁷ Brandes, 'National and International Planning', pp. 290–91.

⁵⁸ Alfred M. de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Anglo-Americans and the Expulsions of the Germans*, 2nd edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979).

receiving many expellees into their occupation zones.⁵⁹ The destruction of German society avenged, of course, the Nazis' destructive policies towards the Slav and other east-central European peoples, rather than their extermination of the Jews, which was of less concern to the post-war central European governments. (Thus the broader genocide perspective advocated in this article – and at the time by Lemkin, who always referred to the general 'Nazi genocide' of the occupied peoples in general – better explains this development than the more common Holocaust-centric approach). There was some British resistance to these developments, and even Churchill was discomfited by some of the atrocity reports;⁶⁰ a few, Bertrand Russell for example, protested strongly.⁶¹ However for most British people, these expulsions, which destroyed historic communities on a scale – if not with a murderousness – comparable to that of the destruction of Jewish communities in the same regions, barely registered. Many tacitly accepted, like the Soviet, Czech and Polish leaders, the principle of collective responsibility which made all Germans guilty of Nazi crimes, although this idea was exactly how Nazism itself viewed Jews, Russians, Czechs, Poles and others.

The principle of collective punishment also provided secondary justification for the most problematic of Britain's own wartime policies, the extensive bombing of German cities. This was not, in itself, genocide: Britain's prime aim was not to destroy German society as such, but to destroy the 'morale' of the German population, in order to weaken the Nazi regime.⁶² Nevertheless the methods had much in common with overtly genocidal policies: 'terror-bombing',⁶³ 'dehousing' entire populations,⁶⁴ destroying whole towns and many of their inhabitants by flooding, fire and burying them under their ruined buildings. Likewise the mentality: if it was the US Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Morgenthau Jr., who notoriously articulated the idea of permanently destroying Germany's cultural and industrial fabric – of 'pastoralising' Germany – it was Britain's Bomber Command which, in the words of A. C. Grayling, 'continued to act in ways that gave every impression of trying to bring about such a result'.⁶⁵ For the Royal Air Force had begun its campaign to destroy Germany's cities by attacking their historic centres – provoking the retaliatory 'Baedeker raids' on British cities listed in the famous guide – and continued with 'a concerted smashing of as much of Germany, its people and its cultural heritage as possible'.⁶⁶ The campaign was similar in scope to the US bombing of Japan: both are testimony to the general degeneration of warfare – already manifested in the brutalities of the Japanese and German

⁵⁹ Donald Bloxham, *Genocide, the World Wars and the Unweaving of Europe* (Edinburgh: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), p. 122.

⁶⁰ Matthew Frank, *Expelling the Germans: British Opinion and the Post-1945 Population Transfer in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶¹ De Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam*, p. 108.

⁶² As the Air Staff directive of 14 February 1942 put it, 'The primary object of your operations should now be focused on the morale of the civilian population [...]': A. C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities: Is the Targeting of Civilians in War Ever Justified?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), p. 50.

⁶³ RAF press briefing, quoted by Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, p. 72.

⁶⁴ Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities*, pp. 59, 82–91.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–62, 176.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

invasions of China and Europe respectively, to which Allied policies responded – and to its affinity with the specifically genocidal developments of the same period.⁶⁷

Britain's role in the genocidal violence of decolonisation

The last two discussions have emphasised that the British state was mostly not a direct perpetrator of genocide – although it practised degenerate war in the colonies as well as against Germany – but it was complicit in genocide committed by others, particularly British colonists and its allies in European wars. I shall now argue that this character of official British involvement continued after the Second World War. But important general changes were taking place in the late 1940s, a major turning-point in the history of genocide. First, the phenomenon was named by Lemkin and then criminalised by the UN.⁶⁸ Second, after three-quarters of a century in which genocide had become an ever more serious strand of European history, it disappeared from the continent for four decades. It would be nice to think that this shift resulted from the UN Convention. In reality, however, both were results of the definitive Allied victory – which in east-central Europe involved the triumph of Soviet over Nazi population policies – and the subsequent Cold War which firmly embedded its outcomes. Indeed the progress involved in these twin developments appears even more doubtful when viewed in its historical context. Even in the Convention's own terms, one of its main authors, the Soviet Union, could be regarded as a genocidal state: both its wartime deportations of the 'treasonable' peoples – which in a striking coincidence were ratified 'in perpetuity' only two weeks before the Convention was adopted – and the expulsions of the Germans, arguably fell within its general definition,⁶⁹ even if as noted above, it had been drafted to exclude specific reference to this form of genocidal violence.⁷⁰ (Indeed in the perspective argued here, the USSR had a larger genocidal record, including the pre-war 'liquidation of the *kulaks*' and the terror-famine and the wartime liquidation of the Polish elite; but the better-known exclusion of political groups and social classes from the Convention's remit meant that in its terms, these would not count).⁷¹

⁶⁷ For the idea of 'degenerate war', applied to total war in 1939–1945, see Martin Shaw, *War and Genocide* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), chap. 2.

⁶⁸ Whereas the UN Charter (1945) defined the character of the international organisation to succeed the League of Nations, Universal Declaration on Human Rights (1948) was just that, a declaration without binding legal significance, and the Geneva Conventions (1949) extended the laws of war previously agreed at The Hague, the Convention was a legal instrument creating a completely new supreme type of international crime.

⁶⁹ Nicholas Werth, 'The Crimes of the Stalin Regime: Outline for an Inventory and Classification', in Dan Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of Genocide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007), pp. 400–19; Werth points out (p. 413) that on 26 November 1948, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR ruled that the Chechens, Ingush, Tartars, etc., whose societies Stalin had destroyed through brutal deportation and extensive loss of life, should be punished 'in perpetuity'. Only two weeks after ratifying this genocide (as Werth rightly sees it), Soviet representatives in the UN voted for the Convention which they had helped draft.

⁷⁰ William A. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 196.

⁷¹ Norman Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Moreover, the late 1940s saw major new genocidal violence outside Europe, which was to continue throughout and beyond the Cold War period. The new waves were chiefly but not only in Asia, where the war's shake-up of old imperial arrangements caused new conflicts. As the UN drafted the Convention and the Soviets concluded the elimination of Germans from central Europe, Mao Zedong's Communists came to power in China with the aid of large-scale killing of 'class enemies'.⁷² Meanwhile in India, where the war shifted power away from Britain, the triumph of the national movement was soured by the massive violence of Partition, in which the number expelled or forced to flee (estimated at twelve million) and the number of deaths (at least a quarter of a million) roughly matched those in the expulsions of the Germans.⁷³ Clearly these events were not orchestrated by a central party or state machine, as in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union; but the actions (and failures to act) of the leaders of the Indian National Congress, the Muslim League (the ruling party of emergent Pakistan) and the British Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, fatefully influenced them. The first large massacres pre-dated the Partition plan by nine months, but the imperial authorities drew it up with cavalier disregard for its probable consequences and, like the nationalist leaderships, continued with their course although the outcomes were disastrous.⁷⁴ Moreover these were not purely spontaneous outpourings: 'Everywhere there was an element of planning and organisation involved and a sense of immunity from the governing provincial party – whether League or Congress.'⁷⁵ In this sense the Indian massacres have rightly been seen by some recent historians as genocidal actions, carried out by militia and party organisations.⁷⁶

The Indian Partition offered, indeed, a new, post-colonial model of genocide: partial in its attack on the 'enemy' population; localised and regionalised in the scope of its destruction; decentralised in its political leadership; implemented by paramilitaries rather than regular forces or central state institutions; and yet the product of conflict over the post-colonial state at the national level, informed by ethnic or religious politics in a context of electoral democracy. This model appeared in the moment of transition from the imperial order, and was replicated in some later decolonisations – for example the handover from Belgian rule in Rwanda. Indeed it is echoed in conflicts to this day; thus the massacres in Kenya in 1998 showed (on a smaller scale) a similar pattern of ethnically targeted violence mobilised by local and regional, party and communal organisations, but focused on national elections and with nefarious links to national party leaders.⁷⁷ These events are currently the subject of a pioneering investigation by the International Criminal Court,⁷⁸ but similar violence has occurred in many post-colonial situations. Britain bears no unique blame for the emergence of this new form, but

⁷² Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (London: Cape, 2005).

⁷³ Khan, *The Great Partition*, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Khan charges Mountbatten with 'almost breathtaking callousness' in seeing renewed violence as helping to influence political leaders to accept his plan: *The Great Partition*, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Khan, *The Great Partition*, p. 62.

⁷⁶ Paul R. Brass, 'The partition of India and retributive genocide in the Punjab, 1946–47: means, methods, and purposes', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5 (2003), p. 75; Ian Talbot, 'The 1947 Partition of India', in Stone (ed.), *The Historiography of Genocide*, pp. 420–37.

⁷⁷ International Crisis Group, *Kenya in Crisis*, Africa Report No. 137 (21 February 2008).

⁷⁸ Xan Rice, 'Kenyan leaders fail to sanction tribunal to investigate post-election violence', *The Guardian* (5 November 2009).

its original Indian manifestation is testimony to how genocide can be exacerbated when great powers mismanage their responsibilities, a theme to which I shall have cause to return.

I cannot leave this topic without mentioning another case from the same period, the dispossession of Palestinian Arabs during the creation of Israel in 1948. This can be regarded as a case of genocide (in the broad sense of deliberate social destruction argued above) because a campaign was launched, in the context of war, with the aim of destroying the larger part of Arab society in Israeli-controlled Palestine, and accomplished through massacres and terror which caused the flight of those who were not directly expelled.⁷⁹ Controversy rages, of course, over these events, with a major divergence between Ilan Pappé and others who emphasise the degree of central planning by the Zionist leadership, and those like Benny Morris who see Israeli violence as more circumstantial, opportunist and decentralised.⁸⁰ It is not my aim here to adjudicate these differences,⁸¹ but to note that here another major episode of organised social destruction occurred, as in India but on a smaller scale and with many fewer deaths, on the British watch. From Palestine I can pull together the themes of the last three sections: here was dispossession as a result of settler violence, following from the post-First World War settlement of nationalities issues (including of course the Balfour Declaration), and in the context once more of a mismanaged British retreat from empire. But there is also a new element: here Britain acted not just on its own account as in India, nor only on its old League of Nations mandate, but in the context of the new UN's own proposals for partition, whose implementation stimulated violent conflict. Here, the forms of genocidal violence were depressingly familiar – as Levene says, 'given that [Zionist] operations occurred just two or three years after the end of the Holocaust, the ease with which they took on the aspect of a standard operating procedure is little short of sickening'.⁸² However Britain's role was changing – from an autonomous empire to a component of a global conglomerate centred on the USA and UN. Responsibility for disaster was being internationalised, even if Britain, as the power on the ground, retained a particular share.

⁷⁹ I have explained my view of these issues more fully in 'Palestine in an International Historical Perspective on Genocide', 'Palestine in an International Historical Perspective on Genocide', *Holy Land Studies* 9:1 (May 2010).

⁸⁰ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2007); Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Mark Levene agrees that 'on all this, only one verdict is available, and it is the one that Pappé uses: ethnic cleansing'. Levene, review of Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 9 (2007), p. 680. However this is too simple a conclusion: in the sense used here, 'genocide' is appropriate.

⁸¹ I have discussed the issues surrounding this case in 'Palestine in an International Historical Perspective on Genocide', *Holy Land Studies*, 9:1 (2010), pp. 1–25.

⁸² This Levene summarises as follows: 'After its onset in the initial tentative attacks, the general lack of Arab resistance provided a green light to a formula in which villages were surrounded, often at night or at dawn, and a range of ordnance loosed off to cause panic. The village having usually then surrendered, able men and boys were lined up, and sometimes shot – on the spot, or elsewhere. In worse cases, some where resistance had occurred, sometimes where it had not, a more general massacre ensued.' Levene, review of Pappé, p. 676.

Britain and the genocidal crises of the post-Cold War world

This is the context in which the final part of my argument unfolds. For fifty years now, Britain has no longer been a major world empire: if genocide continued to rear its head in former British territories in Africa or South Asia, for example, as it did in Biafra in 1967 and Bangladesh in 1971, British governments were less directly responsible than in the Indian and Palestinian partitions, although they and Britain's colonial legacy played a significant role in each crisis. Although the UK continued to claim great-power status through its possession of nuclear weapons and permanent membership of the UN Security Council, this status was evidently diminished. There are still residual post-imperial entanglements – such as those which drove Blair's government to its unilateral intervention to end the genocidal civil war in Sierra Leone⁸³ – but the UK has mostly been involved in multilateral enterprises led by the USA and/or UN.

This is not the place for a full evaluation of international responses to genocide in recent decades. Suffice it to say that despite unprecedented international moves to halt and punish genocide, the record is often underwhelming. At their worst, the UN and its peacekeepers have simply handed over threatened civilians to *génocidaires*, as happened in Bosnia, Rwanda and East Timor. British governments and armed forces bear no special shame for one of the worst episodes, as the Dutch do for the Srebrenica massacre (although British SAS observers 'stood aside, powerless' as the Serbians overran the UN enclave),⁸⁴ but they have particular shares in the general Western responsibility. When, after the Gulf War in 1991, Iraqi Kurds rebelled and Saddam Hussein's forces terrorised almost the entire population to flee into the snow-covered mountains bordering Turkey, British Prime Minister John Major was asked if the West hadn't encouraged the Kurds to rebel, Major responded: 'I don't recall asking the Kurds to mount this particular insurrection.'⁸⁵ Only a campaign in the media, coupled with Turkey's refusal to admit the Kurds, pushed Major to join President George Bush in creating a Kurdish 'safe haven' in northern Iraq.⁸⁶ The following year, over Bosnia, Major and his Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, manoeuvred to *avoid* committing British forces to halt the first genocide in Europe for four decades, and tried to maintain 'impartiality' between the principal perpetrators and their victims. As Brendan Simms has argued, this represented Britain's 'unfinest hour': the Conservative government 'sat astride the international management of the Bosnian war like an enormous dog in the manger, by turns resentful and self-congratulatory, firmly blocking any attempt at an alternative strategy'. Eventually Britain committed troops for 'humanitarian' purposes, but this 'was a particularly pernicious case of misplaced pseudo-activism'⁸⁷ since it was unwilling to directly oppose genocidal violence. Moreover, Simms points out, 'Britain's failure over Bosnia was not

⁸³ G. Schafer, 'New Humanitarianism. Britain and Sierra Leone, 1997–2003', *Anthropos*, 104 (2009), pp. 260–1.

⁸⁴ Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Allen Lane, 2001), p. 317.

⁸⁵ ITN News at Ten (4 April 1991), quoted by Martin Shaw, *Civil Society and Media in Global Crises: Representing Distant Violence* (London: Pinter, 1996), p. 89.

⁸⁶ Shaw, *Civil Society*, pp. 79–96; see also Piers Robinson, *The CNN Effect: the myth of news, foreign policy and intervention* (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁸⁷ Simms, *Unfinest Hour*, p. 339.

confined to government. Unlike their American counterparts, parliament and the opposition failed to mount any significant challenge to the executive.⁸⁸ The media mostly followed the government line.⁸⁹ Only after Srebrenica, when President Clinton (who for three years had defaulted on his election-campaign concern for Bosnia) finally decided for action, did British forces and commanders play their part in breaking the deadlock and lifting the siege of Sarajevo. Even then, however, the West was in tacit alliance with Croatia, which carried out its own destruction of Serb communities in the re-conquered 'Krajina'; and the Dayton settlement entrenched the results of genocide, in the division of Bosnia which continues to this day. Moreover international responses in 1994 to the crisis in Rwanda, where genocide was even more obvious than in Bosnia, were even weaker. James Woods, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense under Clinton, has said that 'it was [...] a [...] spectacle of the US in disarray and retreat, leading the international community away from doing the right things and I think that everybody was perfectly happy to follow our lead – in retreat'.⁹⁰ In fact not everybody was happy – there were dissenting voices among the non-permanent members of the Security Council – but the British government seems to have been. As Michael Barnett records, 'Britain fought against the initial push for intervention in April, and then shifted position in May when it had overwhelming evidence of the genocide. Still, it contributed no real resources.'⁹¹ Even a year afterwards, the Foreign Office did not accept that 'genocide' had taken place, and called discussion of whether it had 'sterile'.⁹²

Reacting against Major's record, and perhaps to their own weakness in opposition, Labour leaders took different stances after 1997. Britain became one of the Rwandan Patriotic Front government's main international donors, accepting its share of international guilt for the failure to prevent the genocide. Yet there was a downside to this position: when Rwanda played a major part in the new war (which involved localised genocidal massacres and mass rapes) in the Congo, Clare Short, the Overseas Development minister, 'was persuaded of the Rwandan regime's absolute innocence' despite evidence of its troops' 'extreme violence' against civilians.⁹³ When Serbian repression grew in Kosovo in 1998–1999, Blair took the stand to which I referred above. Yet while NATO's intervention was ultimately successful in halting genocide, in other ways this was a more problematic venture. NATO 'fought' exclusively from the air, because most of its nineteen governments did not dare to risk soldiers on the ground. This led to unprecedented successes in force protection (no NATO personnel died at Serbian hands) but condemned several hundred Serb and Albanian civilians to immolation

⁸⁸ Simms, *Unfinest Hour*, pp. 340–1.

⁸⁹ Gregory Kent, *Framing war and genocide: British policy and news media reaction to the war in Bosnia* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2005).

⁹⁰ Quoted by Linda Melvern, *A People Betrayed: The Role of the West in Rwanda's Genocide* (London: Zed, 2000), p. 230.

⁹¹ Michael Barnett, *Eye-Witness to a Genocide: the UN and Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 171.

⁹² Melvern, *A People Betrayed*, p. 230.

⁹³ Gérard Prunier, *From Genocide to Continental War: The 'Congolese' Conflict and the Crisis of Contemporary Africa* (London: Hurst, 2009), p. 219.

by bombing.⁹⁴ And although NATO ensured the return of the expelled Albanians, it failed to prevent revenge expulsions of Serbs. Thus even the relative success of British and NATO policy was tarnished, both by the transfer of risk to civilians during the war and by lack of determination in the aftermath. Indeed Kosovo shows that Western governments face formidable problems in the use of military power to halt genocidal violence. Anything less than direct, dedicated protection of civilians – and high-altitude bombing can rarely provide that – risks encouraging a genocidally inclined enemy to escalate its violence, as Milošević did after NATO began bombing. And military intervention loads formidable post-conflict responsibilities onto Western governments and international institutions, to which they are often inadequate.⁹⁵

These dangers are not confined to professed ‘humanitarian’ interventions, but are general problems in the Western use of military power. Many of the West’s enemies have ethnicised ideologies and agendas, hence many interventions risk them turning their guns on civilians as well as Western forces. Nowhere has this been clearer than in Iraq, where Saddam Hussein’s regime already had a formidable genocidal record, and where US and UK sanctions policies, combined with his response, had already produced mass death and suffering in the 1990s.⁹⁶ But questions of genocide also arise in relation to events since the invasion of 2003. The reality has been somewhat obscured by the debate about whether civilian casualties since 2003 number around 100,000 as organisations tabulating recorded deaths estimate, or upwards of 600,000 as estimated by indirect methods.⁹⁷ For even on the lower figure, it is evident that the majority of casualties have not resulted directly from US or Coalition military actions, but from what is called ‘sectarian violence’ by Sunni-based Iraqi nationalists and some of the Shi’ite militia. In the terms of this article, this violence has had a genocidal character: Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other militia have deliberately targeted Shia and other non-Sunni communities in Baghdad and elsewhere, using murder and terror to force them out of, and destroy non-Sunni communities in the areas they control; and some of the opposing militia have turned on the Sunni population. Possibly the greatest scandal of Iraq today is the extent to which they succeeded: 1.9 million people, mainly Shia but including nearly all Iraq’s remaining Jews, Christians and other minorities, have been forced to take refuge in neighbouring countries, while 2.6 million are estimated to be internally displaced.⁹⁸ Tempting as it might be to blame this entirely on the Iraqi factions, it raises large questions about the indirect responsibility of US and British leaders. In opting for ‘invasion lite’ to topple

⁹⁴ This ‘risk transfer’ is a structural feature of contemporary Western warfare: see Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and Its Crisis in Iraq* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

⁹⁵ For an account of international failures in Kosovo, Iain King and Whit Mason, *Peace at any Price: How the World Failed Kosovo* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁹⁶ For a discussion of both within a genocide frame, see Levene, ‘Britain’s Holocaust Memorial Day’.

⁹⁷ Thus Iraq Body Count estimates the death toll in Iraq since 2003 as within the range 94,768–103,410 up to December 2009; {<http://www.iraqbodycount.org>} accessed on 16 December 2009. In contrast, Gilbert Burnham, Riyadh Lafta, Shannon Doocy, and Les Roberts, ‘Mortality after the 2003 invasion of Iraq: a cross-sectional cluster sample survey’, *The Lancet* (11 October 2006), estimated 654,965 excess deaths related to the war, or 2.5 per cent of the population, up to the end of June 2006.

⁹⁸ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, {<http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486426.html>} accessed on 30 December 2009, reporting the situation as of 1 January 2009. Of course a considerable proportion of the refugee and displaced populations undoubtedly result from earlier wars and genocidal campaigns.

rather than crush Saddam's regime, and precipitating a transition in which Shia politicians would inevitably prevail over the previously dominant Sunni, the Coalition provoked a lengthy insurgency, turned against the Shia population as well as itself. Since George W. Bush and Tony Blair emphasised the link between the War on Terror and Iraq, they should not have been surprised that Al-Qaeda and similar groups – known for both their mass killings of civilians and their violent sectarianism against Christians, Jews and Shia Muslims – should have turned their 'resistance' against the softer target of the civilian population. The gravest charge, therefore, that we can lay against the Bush and Blair governments is that their invasion provoked a low-level genocidal conflict in Baghdad and elsewhere, whose consequences are still being felt by millions of Iraqis.

Iraq underlines the inevitable contradictions of official Western positions today. Governments and international organisations proclaim unprecedented commitment to the prevention of genocide – over Darfur, the Bush administration even acknowledged 'genocide' as it happened, even if the British government, like the UN, failed to follow this lead. Yet they continue to use military power in ways determined primarily by perceptions of national interest, calibrated by considerations of force-protection enmeshed with electoral calculation, in which the interests of civilians in war zones are well down the list of priorities.⁹⁹ If the failure to respond to genocide is a clear pattern in recent decades, so too is partial, ineffective and (as in Iraq) fundamentally misconceived intervention, which stokes the very fires it claims to put out. It is tempting, in the British context, to frame this as the dilemma between the Major and Blair *paths of national irresponsibility*. But this might trivialise a structural dilemma on whose horns Western politicians in general are very deeply impaled.

At this point we should remember that responsibility for addressing genocide does not rest only with governments. Armed conflict in general, including genocidal crises, is now subjected to unprecedented, multi-centred global surveillance, not only from states but also from media, civil society, public opinion, law and academia. To Western policymakers and military leaders, it may often seem as though this constrains their room for manoeuvre more than that of genocidal states and movements. Yet the latter are also sometimes forced to trim their policies in the light of international pressure resulting from tribunals, media and NGO campaigns.¹⁰⁰ In the Internet age, even individual citizens have new means of influencing national and global policies. This is not to suggest that global civil society is riding confidently to the rescue:¹⁰¹ the evidence of the last two decades suggests that building a global public sphere that can decisively impact on these issues will be altogether more difficult than some believed after 1989.

Is there a special British responsibility to respond to genocidal violence in today's world? If so, it is not only because much of it occurs in countries to which Britain is linked by imperial legacies – and new histories of intervention. Nor is it because Britain has an intrinsically privileged role in the world, as envisaged on the

⁹⁹ Shaw, *The New Western Way of War*.

¹⁰⁰ James Gow argues that Milošević's capitulation over Kosovo can only be explained by his indictment by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia: *The Serbian Project and Its Adversaries: A Strategy of War Crimes* (London: Hurst, 2003), pp. 292–301.

¹⁰¹ For an optimistic view, Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: An Answer to War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

one hand by the proponents of the 'special relationship' with the USA, and on the other in the kind of liberal 'moral imperialism' which believes that if only Britain would lead, the whole world would follow.¹⁰² Britain's responsibility has more prosaic sources: its continuing centrality to global state networks, with overlapping memberships of the UN Security Council, NATO, the EU, the G8, G20 and other major international organisations; and its high-profile roles in the global media, NGO and academic spheres. All of these mean that despite the country's secular decline relative to greater powers, British politicians, broadcasters, campaigners and even academics are well placed to influence wider responses. Hence the current weakness of genocide studies in Britain, compared to the USA or even Australia, is a matter of regret, not least because British traditions in historical and social research could offer correctives to the willingness of some American scholars to tie their work too closely to specific victim-group agendas.¹⁰³

This article has shown the complex and changing parameters of British responsibility for genocide. It is not just that, as David Cesarani argued, the Holocaust is 'a part of British history';¹⁰⁴ the wider history of genocide has touched and been touched by British history in many different ways. We cannot assume that other countries are the problem, Britain part of the solution. The idea of 'bad/guilty' and 'good/vigilant' nations belongs more to genocidal myth than to anti-genocidal understanding. Whole nations never stand unequivocally on one side of the historical process: complexity and ambiguity are the norm. British governments and people have been part of the problem, possibly as or more often as they have been part of the solution. As British citizens and as scholars, we have responsibilities not just to be vigilant, but to investigate the reasons why our politicians, state and social institutions have not always been vigilant, and why indeed they have sometimes been complicit in or indifferent to genocide. The historical lessons are varied, but they leave no reasons for complacency.

¹⁰² For a critique of this approach in the context of unilateral nuclear disarmament, see Richard Hinton, *Protests and Visions: Peace Politics in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).

¹⁰³ Moses, 'Introduction'.

¹⁰⁴ Cesarani, *Britain, the Holocaust and its Legacy*, p. 1.